



# Healthy eating when you're pregnant

## For people who eat vegetarian or vegan diets

**You're pregnant, so this is a good time to review your diet. The food you eat now affects your health, your baby's growth and your baby's future health.**

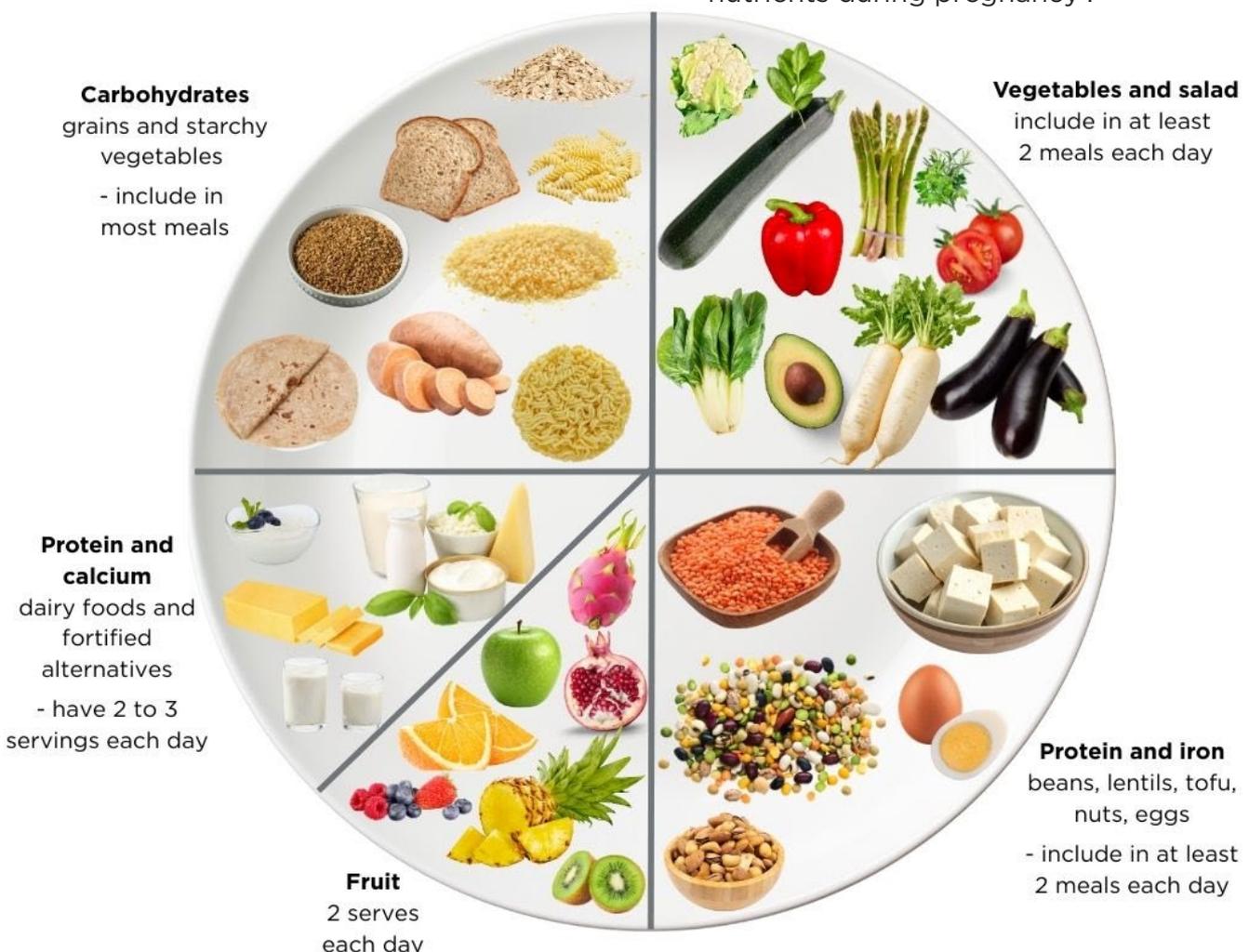
When you're pregnant, you only need to eat a little more food than before. What matters is getting enough of the right nutrients. Nutrients are the parts of food that give you energy and keep you healthy.

A vegetarian diet can give you most of the nutrients you need if you eat regular meals and include foods from all 5 food groups each day (see the image below).

A vegan diet needs more careful planning and specific supplements to meet your nutrition needs during pregnancy. Please see a dietitian for personalised advice and guidance on which supplements to take.

Most people also need folic acid, iodine and vitamin D supplements, because it's difficult to get enough from food alone. If you eat a vegan diet, you'll also need vitamin B12, which helps support your baby's brain development.

We'll explain more in the section 'Important nutrients during pregnancy'.



## Tips to add a variety of foods in your everyday meals

To get a good balance of foods each day, choose a protein, carbohydrate and some vegetables, salad or fruit at each meal.

Remember to add a dairy food or a calcium-fortified plant milk, like soy or almond milk, every day.

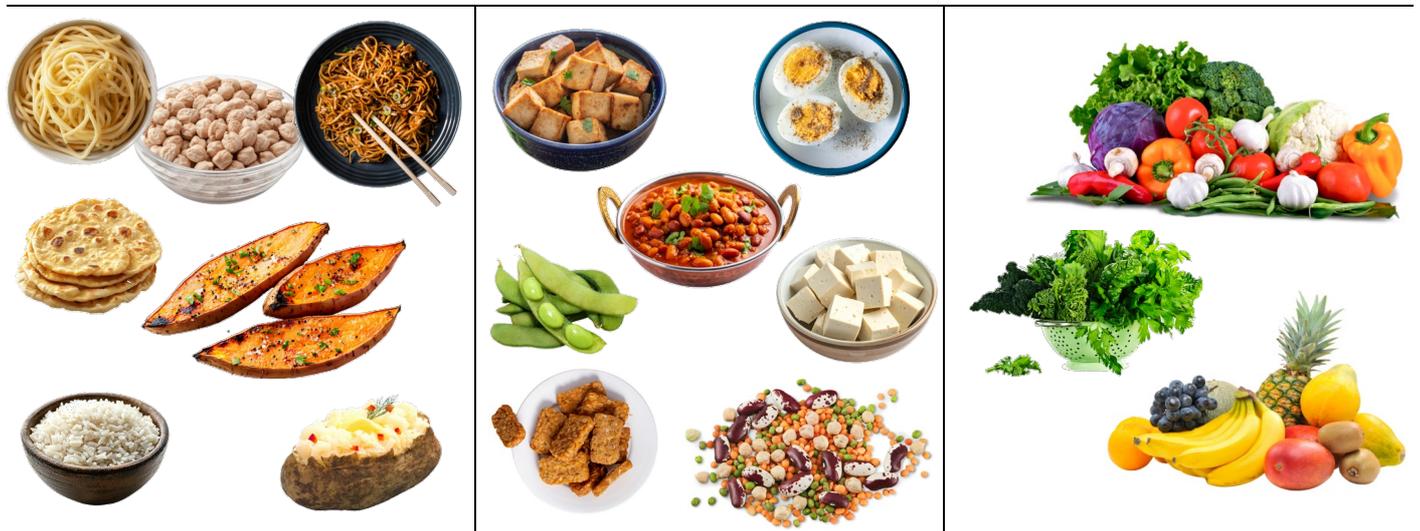
When you make your breakfast, lunch and dinner, choose foods from each column: a carbohydrate, a protein and fruit and vegetables

Carbohydrate	+	Protein	+	Vegetables and fruit
Grain-based foods and starchy vegetables		Dairy foods, eggs, nuts, nut butters, tempeh, lentils, beans, edamame		Colourful vegetables, salads and fruit

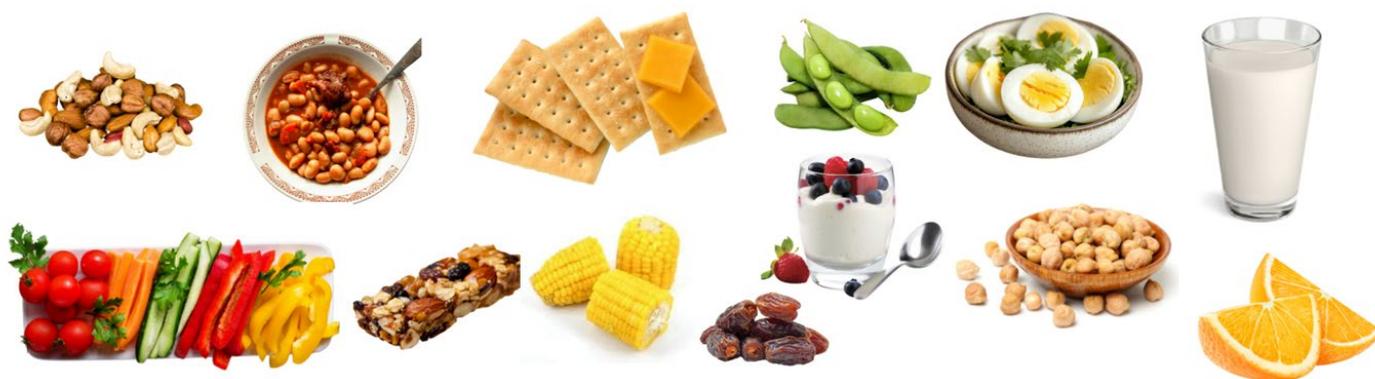
### Breakfast ideas



### Lunch and dinner ideas



Here are some healthy snack ideas for when you're hungry or can't eat enough at mealtimes.



### If you feel sick (nausea)

If nausea affects what you eat, eat what you can manage. When you feel better, return to your usual health eating. Read our fact sheet Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (morning sickness) for more information.

### Important nutrients during pregnancy

#### Folic acid (folate)

Folic acid is a vitamin needed to build your baby's cells. In early pregnancy it can help reduce the risk of birth defects, like spina bifida.

It's difficult to get enough folic acid from food alone, so you'll need to take a supplement.

Start taking folic acid when planning your pregnancy and continue for at least the first 3 months after you're pregnant. You can take a daily folic acid supplement (500 micrograms) or a pregnancy multivitamin.

Some people with certain health conditions or a BMI over 30 may need a higher dose.

Folate is important throughout your pregnancy, so eat foods that are rich in folate, like green leafy vegetables, salad greens, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals, fortified breakfast cereals, legumes and nuts.

#### Iodine

Iodine supports your baby's developing brain and nervous system. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, you need more iodine than usual. Because it's hard to get enough from food, take a supplement of 150 micrograms of iodine every day. Most pregnancy multivitamins contain this amount.

You can also buy supplements that contain both iodine and folic acid.

Do not take kelp (seaweed) tablets, as they may have too much iodine. If you have a thyroid condition, speak to your doctor before taking an iodine supplement.

#### Protein

Protein helps build all body tissues. Try to include protein in every meal.

Foods like eggs, dairy foods, paneer, nuts, legumes (such as dried beans and lentils), and food made from them – like tofu, tempeh and soya nuggets – give you protein and help boost your iron and calcium intake.

#### Iron

Your body needs more iron during pregnancy to make red blood cells for you and your baby. Low iron can make you tired, and if it becomes very low, it can increase the risk of premature birth and low birth weight.

It can be hard to get enough iron from a vegetarian diet. You may need to take an iron supplement if your blood tests show that your iron level is low.

Good sources of iron include:

- legumes (lentils and dried beans)
- nuts and seeds
- eggs
- whole grains
- green leafy vegetables
- iron-enriched breakfast cereals.

Iron from plant sources is harder for your body to absorb. Eating vitamin C-rich foods at the same meal, like citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes or capsicum, can help.

Read our fact sheet 'Iron in pregnancy' for more information.

## Calcium

Calcium builds healthy bones for you and your baby.

Dairy foods, like milk, cheese and yoghurt, are good sources of calcium.

If you drink soy or other plant milks – like almond or rice milk – check the label and choose one with added calcium (at least 100mg per 100ml).

Other good sources of calcium include:

- bok choy
- cabbage
- broccoli
- silverbeet
- almonds
- calcium-fortified breakfast cereals
- tofu – especially tofu set with a calcium-based setting agent (check the label).

If you don't often eat these foods, talk to your dietitian, midwife or doctor about whether you might need a calcium supplement.

## Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb and use calcium to build your baby's bones.

You get most of your vitamin D from sunlight on your skin and smaller amounts from food like egg yolks, margarine and milk.

It can be difficult to get enough vitamin D during pregnancy, so everyone is advised to take a vitamin D supplement of at least 400 international units (IU) every day. Most pregnancy multivitamins contain vitamin D.

If you spend a lot of time indoors, have darker skin or cover most of your body in clothing, your vitamin D may be low. Very low vitamin D can cause weak bones and muscle pain in adults and bone problems (called rickets) in their babies. If you are at risk of low vitamin D, your health professional may suggest you take extra vitamin D.

Talk to your pharmacist to choose a supplement with the right amount of vitamin D for you.

## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is needed for your baby's blood cells, nerves and brain development. Vitamin B12 is found naturally only in animal foods, like meat, fish, dairy and eggs.

If you eat a vegan diet, or you eat very little dairy or eggs, you may not get enough vitamin B12.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding also use up your body's B12 stores more quickly. Babies who are breastfed by parents who eat a vegan diet have a higher risk of low vitamin B12.

Some soy milks and meat substitutes have added vitamin B12. But they may not provide enough vitamin B12 if they are your main sources. Algae, yeast and fermented foods such as tempeh and miso do not provide reliable amounts of vitamin B12.

If you may be at risk of low vitamin B12, it's important to have your levels checked. You may need a supplement.

If you are concerned, talk with your dietitian or doctor.

### **Omega-3 fats**

Omega-3 fats help your babies brain, nerves and eyes develop and may have other health benefits. You can get omega-3 fats from plant foods like walnuts, chia seeds, linseeds (flaxseeds) and soybeans or edamame.

### **Omega-3 supplements**

Most people have enough omega-3 fats in their blood and don't need a supplement.

Some pregnancy multivitamins contain small amounts (less than 300mg) of omega-3 fats as DHA and EPA. This is enough for most people during pregnancy.

Only take a higher dose of omega-3 fats if your health professional checks your blood and says your omega-3 levels are low.

### **Multivitamin supplements**

Taking a daily multivitamin can help you get enough folic acid, vitamin D and iodine if you aren't already taking these separately.

Always check that your supplements are safe for pregnancy. Some multivitamin supplements that aren't made for pregnancy may have too much retinol, a type of vitamin A, which isn't safe when you're pregnant.

Beta carotene, another type of vitamin A, is safe.

If you're not sure which supplements to take, ask your pharmacist, doctor or dietitian for advice.

### **Foods to avoid or limit**

Here are some foods to avoid or limit during pregnancy. For more details, read our fact sheet, Food safety in pregnancy.

#### **Alcohol**

The safest option is to not drink alcohol at all.

#### **Caffeine**

Tea and coffee contain caffeine. You can drink them in moderation, for example, 1 to 2 coffees or up to 5 cups of tea a day. Energy drinks can contain large amounts of caffeine or guarana (a source of caffeine), so you should limit these.

### **How much weight should you gain?**

Your recommended weight gain depends on your pre-pregnancy body mass index (BMI).

You can use an online BMI calculator from the Better Health Channel to work out your BMI. Visit [betterhealth.vic.gov.au/tools/body-mass-index-calculator-for-adult](https://betterhealth.vic.gov.au/tools/body-mass-index-calculator-for-adult)

Check the table on the next page for the recommended weight gain for your BMI range.

If you gain a lot of weight early in pregnancy, aim to slow down your weight gain to the recommended monthly gain.

Dieting is not recommended.

Instead, eat fewer foods that are high in fat and sugar. Be active every day, for example go for a walk, do gentle stretches or seated yoga.

Speak to your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist if you're not sure which exercises are best for you.

Read our fact sheet, *Weight gain during pregnancy*, for more information and tips on eating well and managing your weight.

Pre-pregnancy BMI (non-Asian)	Pre-pregnancy BMI (Asian)	Total recommended weight gain during pregnancy	Weight gain per month in 2nd and 3rd trimesters*
Less than 18.5		12.5 to 18kg	2 to 2.5kg
18.5-24	18.5 to 22.9	11.5 to 16.0kg	1.5 to 2.2kg
25-29	23 to 27.5	7 to 11.5kg	1 to 1.4kg
30 and above	Above 27.5	5 to 9kg	0.7 to 1.2kg

\*The average weight gain in the first 3 months is 0.5 to 2kg.

Source: Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. (n.d.). *Healthy eating when you're pregnant or breastfeeding*. Eat For Health. [eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well/healthy-eating-throughout-all-life/healthy-eating-when-you're-pregnant-or-breastfeeding](http://eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well/healthy-eating-throughout-all-life/healthy-eating-when-you're-pregnant-or-breastfeeding)

## Where to get more information

If you have questions about what to eat or weight gain during pregnancy, ask for a referral to a dietitian.

### The Women's website

For more information on nutrition and pregnancy, visit:  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/a-healthy-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/a-healthy-pregnancy)

The following fact sheets are also available to download:

- Coping with common discomforts of pregnancy  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#coping-common-discomforts-of-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#coping-common-discomforts-of-pregnancy)
- Food safety in pregnancy  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#food-safety-in-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#food-safety-in-pregnancy)

- Healthy eating when you're pregnant with twins  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#healthy-eating-when-pregnant-with-twins](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#healthy-eating-when-pregnant-with-twins)
- Iron in pregnancy  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#iron-in-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#iron-in-pregnancy)
- Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (morning sickness)  
[information/fact-sheets#nausea-and-vomiting-in-pregnancy](http://information/fact-sheets#nausea-and-vomiting-in-pregnancy)
- Weight gain in pregnancy  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#weight-gain-during-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#weight-gain-during-pregnancy)

### Food Standards Australia New Zealand

This website has useful information for consumers. Search for 'Fish and mercury', 'Listeria in food' and 'Food poisoning'  
[foodstandards.gov.au/consumer](http://foodstandards.gov.au/consumer)

### Eat for Health

Visit the Australian Dietary Guidelines website for advice and resources about healthy eating when you're pregnant or breastfeeding  
[eatforhealth.gov.au](http://eatforhealth.gov.au)

### Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

### Family Violence Support

#### 1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732

[1800respect.org.au](http://1800respect.org.au)

## Healthy foods guide during pregnancy

Use this guide to eat a variety of foods and eat more or less depending on your appetite.

Food group	Daily serves	Each item is an example of a serve
Vegetables and legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas)	5	½ cup vegetables 1 cup salad ½ cup cooked legumes
Fruit	2	1 medium or 2 small pieces fruit 1 cup tinned fruit or fruit salad 1 tablespoon dried fruit
Meat alternatives	3 ½	65g cooked lean red meat 80g cooked chicken 100g cooked fish fillet or 1 small can of fish 2 eggs 1 cup canned or cooked legumes - beans, lentils, chickpeas 170g tofu 1 tablespoon (30g) nuts
Dairy or alternatives	2 ½	1 cup milk (cow, soy, almond) Small tub (¾ cup) yoghurt 2 slices (40g) cheese
Grain foods (breads and cereals)	8 ½	1 slice bread, ½ bread roll, 1 chapatti, ½ Lebanese bread, 3 crisp breads 1 cup cereal, ½ cup porridge (cooked) ½ cup rice, pasta, noodles (cooked)
Unsaturated oils and spreads	Optional	1 to 2 tablespoons per day

Limit foods that are high in added fats and sugars, like cakes, biscuits, pastries, high fat takeaway foods and sugary drinks and juices.

Small amounts are okay but eating too much can make you gain extra weight or take the place of healthier foods.

**Disclaimer:** This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.  
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